DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 210 707 CS 206 697

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TITLE "Make It New": Introducing Poetry Through Writing Poetry.
PUB DATE Oct 80
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeast Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (15th, New York, NY, October 16-18, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; *Creative Writing; Higher Education; *Imagery; *Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; Secondary Education; Teaching Methods; Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

One approach to introducing students to poetry is to have them write and analyze their own poems. Although this approach has some disadvantages, it does serve to tap students' experiences and expressive potential with creative projects and to give them an immediate and direct relationship with the traditional published works. By writing poems themselves, students become aware of the elements of poetry at a visceral and intellectual level. Students should read their poems in juxtaposition to published and traditional pieces in order to reinforce instruction and critical thinking and to deepen their literary sensibilities. Three exercises that can be used to emphasize imagery and concrete diction involve writing haiku, riddle poems, and animal poems. Combined with yoga exercises in relaxation and concentration, these writing assignments lead the students gradually from the interior eye of memory to an empathetic viewing of external objects and animals. Three follow-up assignments that deal more with human relationship, allowing students to examine more serious and dramatic content, involve writing the verse epitaph, personal poems and dramatic monologues (in combination with Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"), and the parody. (RL)

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"Make It New": Introducing Poetry Through Writing Poetry

The house of fiction has many windows, Henry James noted. Similarly, there are many approaches to teaching poetry. However, as one inquires into the various practices of the poetry class, one quickly becomes aware of a general constraint, the constraint set up by the anthology or text which the instructor selects for her course. We do not feel this constraint too sharply because most anthologies offer a wide range of poems covering many forms, periods, and voices. In a popular college anthology such as the Little Brown's Introduction to Literature, we find a selection of 130 poems, enough for most instructors even the most contrary to discover a few of their favorites and to find reflected there their notions of what constitutes good poetry.

The pedagogical practice of relying on a body of selected pieces, however, implies an attitude to teaching poetry which has hardened even more in the past few decades with the philosophy underlying new criticism. It would not be too off the mark to characterize the attitude as one of the keeper of the sacred texts; the instructor offers his students a number of classics which by their very definition are endowed, allegedly, with historical distance, tradition, and universality.

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Overtly or covertly, many English teachers hold to the ideal of poetry as touchstone, as the Grecian urn, that "foster child of silence and slow time." And we all recognize these teaching pieces, among them being Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," or Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach."

At the same time, we admit that there has been a revolution in our classrooms. Through the past decade, even while their reading skills have been declining, our students have grown skeptical of the value of the humanities. They frequently enter our classes with more hours of creative writing and film study behind them than hours of reading literature. Most high school teachers spend more time on short stories, plays, and novels than on poetry. In short, the student to whom I have just assigned John Donne's wonderful poem, "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," may very well be reading at a tenth grade level, does not know the meaning of the term "metaphor" and cannot identify one, does not remember a single poem read in his senior year at high school, and is deeply cynical of the value of my reading assignment. Of course, it is possible to teach Donne's poem so as to lead this student through an experience of its dazzling linguistic play, the elegance of its wit, and the force of its emotional expression, but the odds are against my succeeding. Still, it is extremely difficult for most of us in this educational bind to give up our long-cherished notions of the canon in poetry to which we wish to introduce our students. Our training, our own cultivated tastes, even the anthologies we use dictate that we continue

to teach the classics.

Some of us, however, are beginning to weary of this diet of classics. After years of teaching Introduction to Literature courses, we are weakening in the struggle to cover the short story, drama, poetry, and the novel comprehensively in ten to fifteen weeks; the sneaky notion that such comprehensiveness is an impossible assignment is beginning to plague us. Some of us may already have abandoned one of the genres; we no longer teach the novel or drama or poetry. Or we spend two weeks on poetry and force-march our students through a combination of Robert Frost, Bob Dylan, and Ezra Pound. At this point it is clearly time for a re-consideration of our syllabus and our classroom practices. We may be ready now to set aside the anthology and to turn to our students' poems as text.

Given a non literary student population, one fresh approach to introducing them to poetry is to have them write and analyze their own poems.[1] The most obvious disadvantage to this approach is that in the limited period of a semester the instructor will have to give up some of her more traditional objectives--for example, an understanding of poetic forms or a survey of individual talents in the tradition. Nonetheless, beginning an introduction to poetry with students' own poems as text has many advantages. It taps students' experiences and expressive potential with creative projects and gives them an immediate and direct relationship to the traditional published works. In writing poems themselves, students become aware at a visceral and intellectual level of many of the elements of poetry: the power of imagination, the uses of invention, discipline

of form, demands of rhythm, and so forth.

Substituting students' work as text, however, is a risky proposition, for sometimes students do not produce poetry that can be profitably analyzed. Students' work should be read together with published and traditional pieces in order to reinforce the instruction and critical thinking and to deepen students' literary sensibilities. Moreover, the instructor needs to guide students' efforts most artfully so as to insure the most felicitous results. A series of classroom exercises offered sequentially, I have found, can lead to striking results. The exercises I am about to describe owe much in inspiration to Kenneth Koch and his pioneering work with elementary school children and more recently with senior citizens;[2] however, I have taken Koch's original idea, the Romantic idea that everyone is capable of the fresh perceptions and expressive utterances of the poet, off on a different tangent. While subscribing to this Romantic notion, the chief goal of these exercises is to raise students' consciousness of poetic forms, devices, and diction; that is, the expectation of performance is that every student is capable of the analytical tasks of the critic.

The haiku is one of the best exercises for students being introduced to poetry. It is a small form which asks for concentration of effect together with economy of diction, and its conventions require an understanding of image and of suggested emotional statements. The classroom exercise begins with five minutes of meditation.

After the room is darkened, students are told to sit back, close their eyes, and relax. Using traditional yoga techniques, they concentrate on deep breathing and gradually relax the various muscles of their body. When they are quiet and relaxed, they are asked to form a picture in their minds. They are urged to focus sharply on this scene, to select its dominant features, to use their five senses in looking at it, and then to discover their emotional responses to this image. Then the lights in the room come on, and the students free-write on the image they had just formed. They stop after they have written about a paragraph, select the most striking parts of their description, and arrange those keywords and phrases which most concretely express the picture they had imagined into two lines of five and seven syllables each. Finally, recalling the emotions that had accompanied that image, students are asked to express those feelings in a statement without using words which directly denote that feeling. This final statement, the last line of the haiku, should have no more than five syllables.

While students initially resist the exercise because the constraints of the five/seven/five syllabic form appear impossible for them to overcome, they quickly discover that the haiku is, in practice, a simple and enjoyable form. Many students come up with fairly good haikus; for example:

Chipped paint on the door,
Cracked steps and overgrown lawn:
Maybe you're upstairs.

Rori Tolko

Chauffered in Caddy,
Sitting proudly and mighty:
Suburban poodle!

Diane Guida

The follow-up class is spent analyzing their haikus. Students are sometimes overwhelmed with pride when their work is mimeographed and discussed. Very quickly, they learn to identify images, to judge whether images are sharply and concretely conveyed, and to analyze how and what emotions are suggested. They learn to appreciate the indirect and subtle communication. Student poets will correct a glaring misinterpretation, recognize some point about their work that they themselves had not initially preceived, and provide the class with the dramatic context for their haikus. The class was informed, for example, that in the haiku first quoted, the person upstairs whom the student was thinking about was a grandmother whose house was on a street which the student would take everyday to and from school. After the grandmother's death, the student had observed the house gradually deteriorating and had been haunted still by the sense of the grandmother's presence in the house. Given this context, the class begins to appreciate the meaning of poet's intention and is able to discuss with more confidence the importance of diction in expressing that intention accurately and subtly.

Finally I conclude this lesson by summarizing for the students what elements of poetry the exercise had uncovered, specifically the primary function of imagination and the significance of image in poetry; the discipline required behind the use of any poetic form; and the importance of diction and compression of language for emotional expressiveness.

Another assignment which emphasizes the primary place of the imagination in poetry is the riddle poem. On this occasion, after the meditation period, students are asked to picture an object which is ordinary and commonplace and to concentrate on this object so that they see it in all its details. They are then asked to describe this object so as not to reveal its identity to the reader; the point of the assignment is not to fool the reader with false description but to compel him to think in order to arrive at a fresh appreciation of the object. To prepare for this exercise, we read a few poems which contain fresh descriptions of everyday things: for example, Sylvia's Plath's popularly anthologized poem, "Mushrooms" or May Swenson's last well-known poem, "At Breakfast."[3]

AT BREAKFAST

Not quite
spherical
White
Oddly closed
and without a lid

A smooth miracle
here in my hand
Has it slid
from my sleeve?

The shape
of this box
keels me oval
Heels feel
its bottom
Nape knocks
its top

Seated
like a foetus
I look for
the dream-seam

What's inside?
A sun?
Off with its head
though it hasn't any
or is all head no body
a
One

Neatly
the knife scalps it
I scoop out
the braincap
soft
sweetly shuddering
Mooncream
this could be
Spoon
laps the larger
crescent
loosens a gilded
nucleus
from warm pap
A lyrical food

Opened
a seamless miracle
Ate a sun-germ
G ood

In analyzing Swenson's "At Brea'fast," we observe how the poet used description which is both apt yet odd. We note her use of words which appeal to sight, touch and taste. The shell of the egg is described as a box without a lid; it is seen seated "like a foetus" and inside the shell is a sun, the braincap, Mooncream, a gilded nucleus, a lyrical food, a sun-germ good. All these similes, metaphors, epithets, are aimed at "making new" an ordinary domestic item. The poet's imagination, even when expressed in "difficult" language, compels his reader to arrive at fresh perspectives. In contrast, we discuss how cliches, stock responses, and stale descriptions interfere with a fresh perception of the world. In short, the goal of the riddle poem is to illuminate that function of poetry which Samuel Coleridge explained in talking of the Lyrical Ballads:

to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us."

A third assignment which underlines what Coleridge elsewhere called the "esemplastic" power of the imagination is writing the animal poem. It is useful to begin this exercise with posing some leading questions. For example, the class may begin by querying the notion of re-incarnation. Students may be asked to give reasons for choosing the specific animals that they would return to life as; or they may discuss which animal they most resemble when they find themselves in certain situations. Reading out a list of domestic and exotic animals, birds, and insects can also help excite their imaginations. During the meditation, the students are asked to picture various animals, to focus on one animal the individual feels a close kinship to, and then to free-write a description of this animal. Students may produce a mythological creature or an imagined beast. After they have written for about fifteen minutes, they read their passages aloud and thence attempt to work them into some recognizable form, perhaps a ballad or a prose poem.

In the follow-up analysis, students are asked to explain the underlying relationship between the animal described and aspects of the writer's personality. For example, in this student's prose poem describing a pigeon in downtown New York:

Epitome of mobility!
Yet when you choose to land, you're always seen in the best of company.
I've seen you once, absorbing the warmth of Miss Liberty's flame. And, yes, that Saturday in the park, there you were chatting with Walt Whitman!
But I've seen you downtown too, under the Arch with the woman who carried all those bags. And while pecking about her feet, you display your willingness to make friends.
To the dismay of many you leave your mark wherever you go, but I'd like you to know it's not you they don't like. It's just the way you sign your name.
But what do you care? In the blink of an eye you're simply a child with an entire sky for a playground.

Carol Reesor

The class was able to analyze the pigeon's mobility, egalitarian friendliness, and child-likeness in relation to the writer herself. The chatty humor and urban setting in the poem were recognizable parts of the student's identity. As the discussion proceeded it became clear that in the writer's empathy with this carefree, foot-loose city bird, she had created a symbol of herself. By the end of this lesson, students had begun to understand not only the denotative and expressive aspects of language but also its symbolic function.

The three exercises discussed so far emphasize imagery and concrete diction; students are lead gradually from the interior eye of memory to an empathetic viewing of external objects and empathetic animals. The three following assignments will deal more with human relationships to allow students to examine more serious and dramatic content.

A simple assignment which gets students to examine social relationships is the verse epitaph. To prepare for this exercise, during the meditation period, they are asked to recall someone to whom they have had a strong reaction: a rival in love, a rude store-keeper, an unpopular teacher. They are asked to imagine this person's personality, career, and life more fully and then to summarize their thoughts in such a way that their emotional response to this person is conveyed clearly. Students then shape this summary into the form of an obituary.

At this point, the instructor may begin an elementary description of the chief metrical patterns in English poetry to prepare students for re-writing their obituaries in the form of verse epitaph of two or four lines of tetrameters or decasyllables, rhyming aabb or abab or abba or abcb. Student's initial frustration with the assignment is soon overcome by reading a selection of caustic and humorous epitaphs. J.V. Cunningham's tightly organized "Epitaph For Someone or Other," for example:

> Naked I came, naked I leave the scene,
> And naked was my pastime in between

raises their consciousness of satirical possibilities in their own observations, while Hilaire Belloc's "Epitaph on the Politician":

> Here richly, with ridiculous display,
> The politician's corpse was laid away.
> While all of his acquaintance sneered and slanged
> I wept: for I had longed to see him hanged.

reminds them of larger social themes available for biting commentary. In the follow-up analysis, as students discuss their verse epitaphs, they learn to identify forms and rhyme schemes. This is also an appropriate occasion to explain the different devices that make up the sound of a poem, for, in a tight form like the verse epitaph, alliteration, assonance, repeated sounds, onomatopoeia, euphony and cacophony become pronounced elements. Students enjoy the humor, sacarsm, irony, and satire in their pieces, all terms which bear enthusiastic scrutiny in reference to their own poems.

A more serious assignment attempts to show how poetry is also the medium through which poets arrive at self-understanding while teaching the uses of the persona and of dramatic monologues. In this exercise, students imagine that they have just met someone from their past, someone who knew them quite well and who has not seen them in a long while: a long-lost cousin, an aunt, ex-school-mate, old play-mate, a teacher or priest. During the meditation period they are asked to imagine a conversation between themselves and this person in which the person is responding to the students' present position in life. The person may be envious of, contemptuous of, pleased, surprised, saddened, shocked, or upset by the changes he or she notes in the student. Then students free-write the imagined conversation before shaping only the other's remarks and/or unspoken thoughts in the form of a dramatic monologue.

Through this exercise, the instructor is able to explain the concept of the persona, the choice of a voice other than the poet's own which functions as a kind of mask through which the poet views his world ironically. The use of the persona in the dramatic monologue allows students to examine how they have changed in time, as well as the personality of the other and the relationship that once existed between the writer and the other. Moreover, students learn at first-hand that beyond description, image, symbol, satire, or irony is still the domain of psychological and metaphysical drama, the tensions of the self experiencing itself in the world.

In the follow-up exercise, students analyze not only their own poems but also Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and T.S. Eliot's "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." It is surprising how writing their own dramatic monologues prepare students to better understand the ironical dimensions of the Duke's character and the psychopathic quality of his relationship with his Duchess when she was alive and even now when she was dead.

Students find it easier to appreciate the fine nuances of the Prufrock persona, to imagine the speaker and his situations as he painfully ponders the fragile limitations of his narrow and insecure world and yearns for some romantic apotheosis.

My last illustration of how to use student text to teach poetry is the ancient form of the parody. The parody, besides being a respectable sub-genre in literature, is itself a useful teaching device.

As we all know, much learning occurs through imitation. When a student writes a parody of Archilbald Macleish's "Ars Poetica," for example, she learns about varying stanzaic forms, couplets, imagery, alliteratuon, assonance, and so on. The class prepares for this assignment by reviewing the poem's formal features and by noting how the poem's unity is maintained through three different sections each with its own organization of imagery and thought. Then, it reads examples of parodies such as those of Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" by Sir Walter Raleigh, John Donne, and Delmore Schwarze. Specifically, the class analyzes how each poet seizes a widely different theme while imitating the original poem's form faithfully. In completing the assignment of parodying "Arts Poetica," one student wrote the following piece:

Ars Erotic

Sex should be mystical and mute
As a healthy root.

Frolicsome
As the dance of a sugarplum.

Allegro as the violins alive
In Beethoven's Symphony Number Five -

Sex should be unsped
As the baking a gingerbread.

Sex should be moving in time
As the sun climbs,

Staying, as the sun releases
Leaf by leaf the day-drenched trees,

Staying, as the sun behind the rain-soaked leaves,
Memories of love's pantomines -

Sex should be moving in time
As the sun climbs.

*

Sex should be a billet-doux:
Not taboo.

For all the history of love
An open door and a soaring dove.

For more love
Two leaning bodies and moonlight above the bed.

Sex should not be starved
But fed.

Jacqueline Pons

As is apparent in this poem, the student has successfully understood rhythmic and rhyming patterns, imagery, alliteration, assonance, consonance, humor and wit, elements which can all be analyzed by the class vis-a-vis her poem. When such a parody is used as a text for analysis next to Macleish's poem, students' attention is immediately heightened, for the parody offers them a relevant subject using topical imagery in everyday English.

Finally, in this exercise as in all the others, students' pride in their creative efforts is the catalyst to provoking their analytical capabilities. Theodore Weiss said of the deconstructionist critic, Roland Barthes, that Barthes' shift from critic to author gave him "a stake in the imagination and the personal." In a similar manner, when our students become poets, their stake in the imagination and the personal awakens their interest in criticism and gives them an immediate acquaintance with the tools of criticism.

Footnotes

[1] This approach wad discussed briefly by Ronald Wallace in "Babble and Doodle: Introducing Students to Poetry," College English, Vol. 43, No. 6, October 1981, pp. 556-568.

[2] Kenneth Koch, Wishes, Lies, and Dreams (New York: Vintage Books), 1970.

[3] May Swenson, A Cage of Spines (New York: Rinehart & Company,Inc.), 1958, p. 41.

[4] Theodore Weiss, review of Denis Donaghne's Ferocious Alphabet, New York Times Book Review, October 11, 1981, p. 35.